

Committee Secretary
Finance and Administration References Committee Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House CANBERRA ACT 2600 AUSTRALIA
24 January 2024

ACCESS TO AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE BY LOBBYISTS

Thank you for raising this important subject and this opportunity to comment.

About Jonathon (Jon) Rose

I'm a 66-year-old mostly retired person with a diverse background primarily in the health and social welfare fields. However, I'm commenting on this issue as a general citizen who is very concerned about the state of our democracy as well as the decline of democracies worldwide.¹

Preamble to the Terms of Reference for this inquiry

At this critical time when Australia and the world is facing a number of possible existential crises, when we need excellence in our governmental institutions and leadership, we see trust declining, particularly in reference to the influence of big business in decision-making.²

Overall issues of access to the Australian Parliament by lobbyists along with transparency of the who, how, and what for, are central to the concept of democracy.

Representative democracy necessitates hearing the voices of the people it represents including those with little voice. It seemed odd to me the government felt a need for a divisive referendum for an important minority group to have a Voice in Parliament. I thought this was the government's mandate - to hear voice, including minority groups. Meanwhile, literally hundreds of unelected entitled lobbyists have generally unfettered direct access to our politicians behind closed doors.

Ultimately lobbying should be something which primarily benefits the people, ideally in some sort of a win-win situation. Government needs to take the lead and be more directive in this regard.

Additional ways to hear the Voice of the People (for example to promote things like [YourSAY](#), citizens' advice juries, online, evidence-based government sponsored social networking groups to create dialogue around specific issues) might be considered in another inquiry.

If not yet invited to comment, this committee might consider inviting [Transparency International Australia](#) to comment, and maybe also to collaborate in progressing recommendations?

¹ [Freedom House](#) 2023 reports 17 consecutive years of declines in freedom and democracy worldwide.

² [Accountability in crisis: Australians have never been more distrustful of government and business](#) UNSW 2023

Current transparency arrangements relating to the lobbyist register;

While those in the know may be able to utilize [The Lobbyist Registrar](#), I certainly wasn't able to access ANYTHING from it!! This registrar should not only reflect what bureaucrats need from it but importantly the general public. In addition to the current information in the registrar it needs to be able to reflect more precisely the what, when, why, and how often to whom etc. That is, it should reflect who and what are these lobbyists doing. For example, it should be clear what is the level of activity in various domains lobbyists are choosing to influence (domains created by government in a hierarchy – eg, Energy then subsets, of Fossil Fuels, Renewables, then Gas, Petroleum, etc.).

This data should be easily accessed and understood by the general public. To do this, I recommend;

- a. Focus groups to ask what the general public would like to know about lobbyists
- b. Create data sets to reflect these wishes which not only produce tables, but also things like bar graphs to indicate what is happening behind closed doors.
- c. Focus group test public and target groups access to the new transparent data formats
- d. Publicise this/these data set/s to better engage Australians in political processes, create more trust, and invite feedback.

The current sponsored pass system for lobbyists to access Australian Parliament House with particular regard to transparency and publication of lobbyists who are pass holders and their sponsors

For both Parliamentarians and the general public, the number of lobbyists as well as the domains they are lobbying for need to be qualified and quantified. The current situation overall is those areas with big money have big numbers and power which has a distorting impact on decision-making.

Publicly accessible information of Australian Parliament House pass holders who are lobbyists and their sponsors.

The public not only have the right to know who these lobbyists and their sponsors are but also what was discussed (in general terms). After each meeting with a lobbyist, the politician involved should fill out a brief template with things like who the lobbyist was, who they represented, a very brief dot point summary of what was discussed, any agreements made, implications for public value (the wellbeing of the public), follow-up, other.

All these meetings should be video-taped, not for general public, but rather for audits which randomly select meetings to assess if notes reflect the actual meeting (and also to add as a corruption deterrent.

Summary

Lobbying should be a well-designed privilege aimed at benefiting society at large. Rather than a passive recipient, government needs to better direct lobbying to first meet the community's needs. This will require limiting some areas and expanding/better supporting/resourcing others.

Better transparency and accountability in these areas, while challenging, will go a long way to improve decision-making, restore public trust, and increase public engagement and citizenship.